

## 2006 American Community Survey Frequently Asked Questions

*In this document, we are providing answers to questions that media and other data users may have about our 2006 American Community Survey (ACS) data releases. As we learn of other frequently asked questions, we will add those questions and the U.S. Census Bureau's answers to this document.*

### **1. How does the 2006 ACS data differ from ACS data released by the Census Bureau in previous years?**

The 2006 ACS data are a more complete data set. During the years when the ACS was in the developmental stages (1996 through 2004), housing unit data were collected in a limited number of counties in the United States. In 2005, the Census Bureau expanded the sample size of the ACS to 3,000,000 housing unit addresses and data were collected in all 3,141 U.S. counties, American Indian and Alaska Native areas, and Native Hawaiian areas. In 2006, the ACS sample was expanded to include the population living in group quarters. 2006 ACS data now includes both data on the housing unit and the group quarters populations.

### **2. Weren't data for the group quarters population included in earlier releases of ACS data?**

No. 2006 is the first year of expanded sample to include data for the group quarters population.

### **3. What are group quarters?**

A group quarters is a place where people live or stay that is normally owned or managed by an entity or organization providing housing and/or services for the residents. These services may include custodial or medical care as well as other types of assistance, and residency is commonly restricted to those receiving these services. People living in group quarters are usually not related to each other.

Group quarters include such places as college residence halls, residential treatment centers, skilled nursing facilities, group homes, military barracks, correctional facilities, and workers' dormitories.

Group quarters are categorized into two groups, institutional and noninstitutional, for use in the disability and poverty statistics.

**Institutional Group Quarters** - Includes facilities for people under formally authorized, supervised care or custody at the time of interview, such as correctional facilities, nursing facilities/skilled nursing facilities, in-patient hospice facilities, mental (psychiatric) hospitals, group homes for juveniles, and residential treatment centers for juveniles.

**Noninstitutional Group Quarters** - Includes facilities that are not classified as institutional group quarters, such as college/university housing, group homes intended for adults,

residential treatment facilities for adults, workers' group living quarters and Job Corps centers, and religious group quarters.

A complete description of the types of group quarters included in the 2006 ACS is located on the U.S. Census Bureau's web site at [www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/GQ/def.htm](http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/GQ/def.htm).

#### **4. What data products will be available for the group quarters population?**

Most 2006 ACS data products will include **both** the population in housing units and the population in group quarters. This is the total population. The 2005 ACS data products included only the population in housing units.

The Census Bureau is releasing a number of national level subject tables describing group quarters population characteristics. The tables will include summaries of the following:

- Characteristics for the group quarters population living in the three major group quarter types (adult correctional facilities, nursing facilities/skilled-nursing facilities, and college/university housing) at the national level
- Characteristics for the institutionalized and the noninstitutionalized group quarters population at the national, census region and division levels
- Characteristics of the total group quarters population at the national, census region, and division levels and for Puerto Rico and 35 states.

#### **5. Why does the 2006 ACS data products provide the GQ population for only certain states?**

Only thirty-five states (see below) and Puerto Rico had large enough sample sizes to meet the 2006 ACS publication threshold.

States meeting the GQ Population threshold of 45,000+:

Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Puerto Rico

It is the goal of the ACS in 2007 to publish 3-year group quarters population estimates of the characteristics of the total group population for all states. To achieve this goal, we plan to use a statistical adjustment to the weighted data to apply the characteristics of the 2-year period estimate (2006-2007) to the 3-year period population estimates (2005-2007).

**6. For what types of geographic areas and characteristics are intercensal population and housing estimates available?**

The Population Estimates Program of the Census Bureau develops and prepares estimates of the population by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin for the nation, states, and counties. The Population Estimates Program prepares estimates of the total population of the nation, states, counties, and cities and towns, as well as estimates of the number of housing units for the nation, states, and counties.

**7. When should intercensal population estimates be used rather than 2006 ACS data?**

Data users should choose intercensal estimates of the total population as well as the number of people by age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin when these estimates are available. The intercensal population estimates include both the household and group quarters populations.

For some geographic areas, the Census Bureau does not release intercensal population estimates, such as Congressional Districts, the number of people in detailed race, Hispanic origin, and tribal groups. In these cases data users should use 2006 ACS data. Note that the 2006 ACS data include people in group quarters, whereas the 2005 ACS data did not.

**8. How do data users access the Population Estimates Program intercensal estimates.**

To help users understand when to use Population Estimates Program estimates and when to use ACS estimates, we have placed a note at the top of ACS data profiles and other tables which states:

*Although the American Community Survey (ACS) produces population, demographic and housing unit data, it is the Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program that produces and disseminates the [official estimates of population levels, age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, and housing unit totals](#) for selected geographic areas.*

The underlined text is a link. If you click on it you are taken to an intermediary page that includes links to total population estimates for the United States and states, counties, and cities and towns; and housing unit estimates for the United States and states and counties.

Age, sex, race, and Hispanic origin estimates can be accessed from the intermediary page, too. Select the U.S., a state, or a county and click "Go."

Ranking tables for the United States by state, based on Population Estimates Program intercensal estimates can be accessed from the intermediary page. These are ranking tables for:

- Median Age
- Sex Ratio
- Percent of the Population Who Are 65 Years and Over
- Percent of the Population Who Are 85 Years and Over
- Age Dependency Ratio
- Child Dependency Ratio
- Old-Age Dependency Ratio

**9. Should data users compare 2006 ACS data with sample data from Census 2000?  
Should data users compare 2006 ACS data with data from the 2005 ACS?**

In some cases, comparisons can be made but in other cases they should not. The 2005 ACS was limited to the household population, and excluded the population in group quarters.

At <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/compACS.htm> data users can find links to tables showing which comparisons are valid, which should be undertaken with caution, and which should be avoided.

**10. I do not see data for my town. When will I get ACS data?**

In late 2008, the Census Bureau will release data for all geographic areas with populations of 20,000 or larger. In late 2010, the Census Bureau will release data for areas as small as census tracts and block groups, nationwide. So, for very small towns, 2010 will be the first time ACS data are published. These data products, referred to as 5-year multiyear estimates, will be based on the data accumulated during the 2005-2009 time period.

**11. Will there be data for the Gulf Coast Areas that were affected by the hurricanes as published in 2006?**

The focus of this year's upcoming release of 2006 ACS data (beginning August 28 and stretching in to September) has been on the inclusion of ACS group quarters data for the first time. Recognizing that there will be a continued interest by the media and policy makers on reconstruction efforts in New Orleans and other affected areas, ACS data can meet those needs in two ways. First, our basic data products will provide key characteristics for all geographic areas of 65,000 or more. Second, we are working on an exciting and unique opportunity to partner with the Brookings Institution (Metropolitan Policy Program) to provide detailed ACS data on the affected areas. The Metropolitan Policy Program is the forefront data source on Katrina related data with the monthly publication of their "Katrina Index" (newly renamed as the "New Orleans Index") and development of the "Katrina Reading Room" an on-line clearinghouse for Katrina related research (<http://www.brookings.edu/metro/katrina.htm>).

Nearly half (29 of 63) of the unique geographic areas that were released in the *2005 Special Product for Gulf Coast Areas* will be released as part of the data releases beginning this August and additional components of the remaining county groupings will also be released. Additionally, through the upcoming partnership with Brookings (see above), special analytical reports will be released that complement the data released by the Census Bureau, thus meeting the need for substantive analysis on the changes in the socioeconomic composition of the affected population.

**12. I know that next year's ACS release will include multiyear estimates. What are the benefits of the multiyear estimates?**

Multiyear estimates provided every year will show trends that give federal, state, and local agencies, as well as communities, more information for informed strategic decisions than a snapshot at ten-year intervals. For example the multiyear estimates could show what effect the closing of a military base had on a nearby town or alert a local school system to the influx of immigrant children.

**13. What is a margin of error?**

The margin of error is a measure of the sampling error associated with each published ACS estimate. The smaller the margin of error, the more precise the estimate will be. A margin of error is the difference between an estimate and its upper or lower confidence bounds. Data users can create confidence bounds by adding (for an upper bound) and subtracting (for a lower bound) the margin of error from the estimate. All published margins of error for the ACS interpreted as providing 90 percent certainty that the confidence interval defined by the upper and lower bounds contains the population parameter or the true value of the characteristic.

**14. How can I test to see if the 2006 ACS data differ from data for Census 2000?**

Comparisons of 2006 ACS to Census 2000 tabulations are based on a statistical test for the difference between two estimates. The test requires having both estimates and their standard errors. The 2006 ACS Accuracy of the Data documentation available on the ACS Web site contains instructions on obtaining the standard error from the published 90 percent margin of error. For Census 2000 data, it depends on the source of the data. Census 2000 short form tabulations such as the data released in the SF-1 and SF-2 data sets have no sampling error. Instructions on calculating standard errors for estimates from Census 2000 sample or long form tabulations, such as the estimates found in SF-3 and SF-4, can be found in Chapter 8 of the SF-3 Technical Documentation. Instructions on performing the statistical test and interpreting the results can be found in the 2006 ACS Accuracy of the Data document.

**15. What is a period estimate and can I interpret a 1-year period estimate from the ACS as I did estimates from the 2000 long form?**

Period estimates are designed to describe a period of time. The 1-year estimates from the 2006 ACS describe the people and their characteristics as well as the characteristics of housing during calendar year 2006. Most 2006 ACS estimates can be thought of as representing the average characteristics of an area during the time period of January 1, 2006 through December 31, 2006. In contrast, the long form estimates in Census 2000 were designed to measure the characteristics of population and housing as of a point-in-time, specifically April 1, 2000. They are interpreted as describing the characteristics of the April 1st population and housing. For many areas ACS period estimates will be very similar to Census point-in-time estimates. If the population or housing characteristics of an area change substantially during the year, the ACS period estimates will differ from the Census long form (or point-in-time) estimates.

**16. Where can I learn more about the quality of the ACS data?**

All ACS estimates are published with their 90 percent margin of error, which is frequently used as a measure of quality. Additional quality measures are available at the national and state levels. These include the number of initially selected sample units and the final number of interviews, coverage rates, response rates, and item allocation rates. Please see <http://www.census.gov/acs/www/UseData/sse/index.htm> for more information on the ACS quality measures.

**17. What happened to the demographic characteristics profile?**

In 2005, the demographic characteristics profile appeared first on the list of data profiles. It now appears fourth, after the housing characteristics profile. The content of the demographic characteristics profile has also changed. The demographic profile is now restricted to data on population totals, age, sex, race, Hispanic origin, and total housing units. In addition, a headnote has been added to this table that distinguishes between the ACS estimates for these characteristics and the Census Bureau's official estimates for these characteristics. The headnote also includes a direct link to the Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program Web page. Data on households by type and relationship have been moved from the demographic characteristics profile to the social characteristics profile.

**18. Why aren't you producing state-level ranking tables for age and sex, as you did last year?**

The age and sex ranking tables now appear on the Census Bureau's Population Estimates Program Web page since the Census Bureau's official estimates of age and sex come from the Population Estimates Program and not the ACS.

**19. Why aren't you ranking areas other than states?**

Ranking table data below the state level are presented in the geographic comparison tables. The data in the geographic comparison tables are not ranked because the margins of error for the sub-state estimates are generally larger than those for the state estimates thus making numerical rankings less meaningful. Data users can download the data in the geographic comparison tables to Excel spreadsheets and sort the resulting files by the point estimate.

**20. I noticed that in your plans to release the PUMS file, you have noted that three Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) did not have sufficient population to be included, and therefore were assigned a special code so that ACS PUMS data for Louisiana could be complete. Why was there a need to take this step?**

The PUMS data are published this year for 2068 PUMS areas (PUMAs), each of which is defined exactly as it was for the 2000 Census sample PUMS file. Due to the effects of hurricane Katrina, three PUMAs in Louisiana no longer have sufficient population to be included in the PUMS data as separate entities, with their original PUMA codes. The codes for these three PUMAs in Louisiana are 01801, 01802, and 01905. To ensure that the ACS PUMS data would remain complete and additive, the records in the data file in these three PUMAs have been assigned a special code of "77777." However, users should note that this is not an official Census Bureau geographic code.